

Communicative Language Teaching: Exploring Theoretical Foundations and Practical Challenges

Kustiwan Syarief

Abstract: The genesis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can be traced back to the 1970s when researchers and language practitioners began reflecting and discussing the notion of communicative competence. In practical terms, however, there has been such a gap between theoretical foundations of CLT on the one hand and its implementation in classroom environments on the other hand. This article explores and discusses the theoretical foundations of CLT based on the existing models of communicative competence and continues with identifying CLT's practical challenges commonly persisting in second/foreign language teaching and learning contexts.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, communicative competence, meaning-making, negotiation of meaning, second/foreign language contexts.

It has been well established that different methods and approaches such as grammar and translation method (GTM), audio-lingual method (ALM), humanistic approach, and communicative language teaching (CLT) approach have emerged in the field of second language pedagogy. These methods and approaches have come into existence based on their own assumptions as to how second/foreign language teaching and learning should be implemented in order to promote the target language acquisition. Studies and research into the issue of second language acquisition, on the other hand, have provided valuable insights regarding the basic nature of language and language teach-

Kustiwan Syarief is a lecturer at the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Alauddin Makassar

ing and learning. As Brown (2001) suggests, these insights have contributed to the theoretical foundations on which such methods and approaches are based. More broadly, McCarthy (2001) points out that different ways of looking at the nature of language as a universal attribute of human being and languages as the manifestation of this attribute in actual linguistic behaviours have resulted in different conceptualizations of how applied linguistics as a professional discourse should respond to language-related problems in actual contexts particularly the issues of language teaching and learning. In other words, different ways of looking at the issues of what language is and how it works in theoretical terms have led to the emergence of different approaches in dealing with language-related problems in practical terms.

As indicated above, CLT is one of the approaches to second language pedagogy. It is an approach which views that second/foreign language teaching and learning should be based on promoting learners' communicative competence that involves the processes of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1997). This indicates that CLT does not belong to any particular method of teaching; rather, it is an approach that can give insights to the incorporation of any methodologies as long as they promote learners' communicative competence. In this regard, Savignon (1991) contends that the main nature of CLT centers on 'the elaboration of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative events' (p. 265).

This article discusses and elaborates some fundamental issues of CLT in terms of its theoretical foundations and its practical challenges. Beginning with a brief history of CLT, the article continues with identifying major characteristics of CLT. The discussion of models of communicative competence is presented to highlight the theoretical foundations of CLT. Finally, the article covers some practical challenges of CLT focusing primarily on the issues of language curriculum and language assessment.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of CLT as an approach to second language pedagogy can be traced back to the 1970s when researchers, teachers, and language practitioners began reflecting and discussing the notion of communicative competence. Savignon (1991) highlights some major developments that illustrate the historical background of CLT. At least two types of historical contexts can be seen from Savignon's description, the European context and the

American context. In the European context, the language needs of rapidly increasing groups of immigrants and guest workers on the one hand, and the British linguistic tradition whose main tenets originated from Firth and Halliday's notion of language as meaning potential on the other hand, led to the development of *functional-notional syllabus* of second language programs. The relatively similar situation also happened in Germany where the movement for individual empowerment and autonomy by German contemporary philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas inspired language teaching methodologists to develop classroom materials that encouraged autonomous learners in doing exercises that exploited the variety of social meanings contained within certain grammatical structures. What can be seen from both contexts is that it was the actual language-related problems that motivated applied linguists and language practitioners to mediate those problems by incorporating existing linguistic theories at that time. The ideas of language as meaning potential that includes social as well as linguistic contexts and learners' autonomy seem to have contributed to the emergence and development of CLT in the European context.

Another historical background that Savignon (1991) mentions is that of the American context. The emergence of CLT in this context was characterized by Hymes' theoretical reaction to Chomsky's notion of *linguistic competence* of the ideal native speaker; instead, Hymes proposed the notion of *communicative competence* as the representation of language use in social contexts. Here, Hymes's notion of communicative competence obviously refers to language as social behaviour, that is, a means of meaning-makings in achieving social interaction. This situation, then, led language teaching methodologists and second language teachers in the US to incorporate communicative activities such as role plays, language games, simulations, and language quizzes into language classroom environments in order to promote learners' communicative competence.

It seems, then, that CLT as an approach to second/foreign language teaching and learning has passed through some developments that involve a *dialectical process* between theories and practices. Actual problems in real contexts have led applied linguists, teachers, and language practitioners to bridge such problems by taking insights from other disciplines especially linguistics, psychology, and sociology. This reflects the interdisciplinary character of CLT as indicated by Savignon (1991; 2003) and more broadly the interdisciplinary character of applied linguistic profession as pointed out by McCarthy (2001), Kaplan & Grabe (1991), and Grabe (2002).

CHARACTERISTICS OF CLT CLASSROOMS

A brief history of CLT indicated above provides some insights about its theoretical and practical backgrounds. CLT has emerged as a theory-and-practice-based approach to second language education. A crucial question might arise here: how does CLT look like in practical classroom situations? To put it another way, what are the main characteristics of CLT in real classroom contexts? Answering this question is of significant importance especially for second language teachers whose profession deals with real challenges in dynamic teaching and learning environments. Brown (2001) outlines interconnected characteristics of CLT underlying the objective of classroom activities, language techniques, and the role of learners and teachers.

Firstly, Brown (2001) suggests that classroom activities should comprehensively focus on all of the components of communicative competence which, according to Canale (1983), consists of *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence*, *discourse competence* and *strategic competence*. These components of communicative competence, as Savignon (1997) suggests, should be taken into consideration in connection to each other. Viewed in this way, CLT requires teachers' innovation and creativity in developing communicative tasks and activities that can promote learners' acquisition of these competences.

Secondly, Brown (2001) claims that instructional techniques in CLT must enable learners to participate in communicative interaction with each other. Here comes the significance of developing the notion of expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning as advocated by Savignon (1991; 1997). CLT thus requires the incorporation of language use for meaningful purposes in unrehearsed contexts, that is, the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language into communicative tasks. Relevant to this notion, Lee & VanPatten (1995) claim that linguistic input to which learners are supposed to attend should be meaningful and comprehensible. Through an interaction in communicative events containing meaningful, authentic, functional, and comprehensible linguistic input learners can express, interpret, and negotiate meaning with each other.

The last characteristic of CLT classrooms as suggested by Brown (2001) is that the role of learners is central since they are given opportunities to develop autonomous learning based on their own learning styles and strategies while the role of teachers is peripheral, that is, that of facilitator and guide of learners' activities. The idea of learner centeredness has also been identified by Savignon (2003) who suggests that CLT puts the focus on learners not on-

ly in terms of processes but also in terms of goals. The focus on learners in terms of process refers to the same concept of learning autonomy as proposed by Brown (2001), while the focus on learners in connection to goals means that learners' communicative needs should serve as a framework for elaborating and identifying program objectives.

MODELS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

It can be explicitly seen from the above discussion of the historical background and characteristics of CLT classroom activities that the conceptualization and implementation of CLT should be based on some model of communicative competence. However, before dealing with models of communicative competence, it is worth understanding the notion of competence and communication. The term *competence* has been widely used by researchers and experts referring to different concepts. Celce-Murcia, et al., (1995) summarize some conceptual differences of the term as used by several linguists and applied linguists. Stern (1983), for example, equates *competence* and *proficiency* while Savignon (1997) views *competence* as *dynamic* and *context specific* in nature. Tylor (1988), on the other hand, views *competence* as *a state or product, not a process*. Taylor then differentiates between *competence*, *proficiency* and *performance*, suggesting that while competence is static in nature, proficiency is dynamic and relates to process and function; performance, on the other hand, is what occurs when proficiency is put to use. The term *communication*, on the other hand, is defined by Savignon (1997) as 'a continuous process of *expression*, *interpretation*, and *negotiation* of meaning [*italic by the author*]' (p. 14). Communicative competence thus indicates the ability to successfully fulfil the processes of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning and these processes should result in measurable or assessable communication products, such as speech, texts, signs, et cetera.

In dealing with the notion of communicative competence, some linguists and applied linguists have developed several models which can be summarised as follow.

Canale's Model

Canale (1983) introduces a model of communicative competence consisting of four main elements, *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence*, *discourse competence*, and *strategic competence*. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of linguistic codes including grammatical rules,

vocabulary, phonology, and graphology. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the mastery of socio-cultural codes including an appropriate use of vocabulary, register, politeness, and style in a given situation. Discourse competence indicates the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive and coherent texts. Strategic competence refers to the knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies such as gestures and eye contacts which enhance the efficiency of communication and enable learners to compensate difficulties when communication breakdowns happen. This model is clearly motivated by the notion of language as a social behaviour that involves a dynamic process of meaning-makings in social interaction and communication.

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell's Model

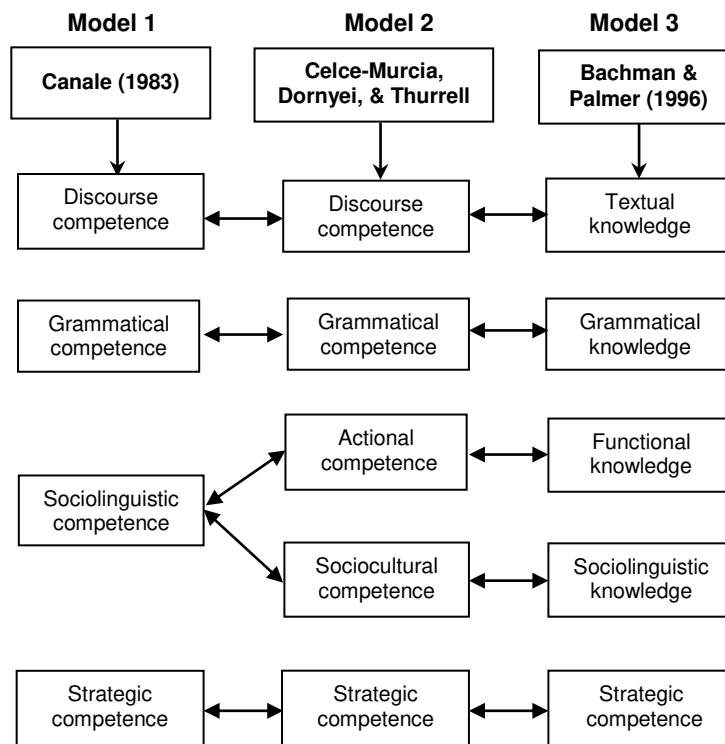
Another model of communicative competence is a model proposed by Celce-Murcia, et al., (1995). This model includes *discourse competence*, *linguistic competence*, *actional competence*, *sociocultural competence* and *strategic competence*. The term *sociocultural competence* in this model refers to the same concept as that of *sociolinguistic competence* in the first model. While the other four competences are relatively similar to those of the Canale's (1983) model, actional competence in this model is defined as 'competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent, that is, matching actional intent with linguistic form based on the knowledge of an inventory or verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force (speech acts and speech act sets)' (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1995: 17). Actional competence in this model seems to be part of sociolinguistic competence in the Canale's (1983) model.

Bachman and Palmer's Model

The last model of communicative competence presented in this article comes from Bachman and Palmer (1996). Their model includes organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Organizational knowledge refers to the knowledge of the components involved in controlling the formal structures of language for comprehending and producing utterances. This knowledge covers grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the knowledge of components that enable learners to relate words and utterances to their meaning, to the intensions of language users, and to relevant characteristics of the language use contexts. This knowledge consists of functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowl-

edge. In addition, the model also covers metacognitive components or strategies which are relatively similar to strategic competence in the first two models.

Despite some slight differences of the three models which indicate their different rationales in identifying and defining what language knowledge is in relation to its communicative function, they all highlight fundamental components of language knowledge and interconnectedness of each component to another in fulfilling communicative tasks. In addition, the three models, to an extent, indicate *a thread of evolution and development* in terms of elaborateness and comprehensiveness. The comparison of the three models of communicative competence can be seen in the following figure (Figure 1).



Source: Adopted and modified from Celce-Murcia, et al., (1995: 11-12); Bachman & Palmer (1996: 68)

Figure 1 Comparison of the Models of Communicative Competence

It is obvious from the figure above that *sociolinguistic competence* in the Canale's (1983) model seems to be elaborated further in the Celce-Murcia, et al's (1995) model by introducing *actional competence* and in the Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model by introducing *functional knowledge*. The terms *actional competence* and *functional knowledge* in the last two models basically refer to the same notion, that is, knowledge of language functions that enables learners to fulfill actual and authentic communicative tasks and activities. It should be noted, however, that the model of Celce-Murcia, et al (1995) offers a more viable option for language teachers and practitioners since it not only highlights the theoretical foundations of communicative competence but also elaborates and identifies possible content specifications that might be integrated into the development of communicative language curriculum. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the main points of content specifications offered by this model.

Table 1 Content Specifications of the Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell's (1995) Model of Communicative Competence

Competences	Main contents
A. Discourse competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cohesion 2. Deixis 3. Coherence 4. Genre/generic structures 5. Conversational structures
B. Linguistic (grammatical competence)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Syntax 2. Morphology 3. Lexicon 4. Phonology 5. Orthography
C. Actional Competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge of language functions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Interpersonal b. Information c. Opinion d. Feelings e. Suasion f. Problems g. Future scenarios 2. Knowledge of speech acts
D. Sociocultural competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social contextual factors 2. Stylistic appropriateness factors 3. Cultural factors 4. Non-verbal communicative factors

Competences	Main contents
E. Strategic competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoidance or reduction strategies 2. Achievement or compensatory strategies 3. Stalling or time-gaining strategies 4. Self-monitoring strategies 5. Interactional strategies

Source: Summarized and modified from Celce-Murcia, et al. (1995: 14, 18, 22, 24, 28)

Given the complexity of the content specifications as mainly outlined in the figure above, it is necessary that second language teachers and practitioners consider the principles of relevance and interconnectedness. In other words, they should be fully aware of what is relevant to whom and in what situation but without paying too much attention to a certain competence or its particular content specification while ignoring others. In this regard, the analysis of both learner and instructional variables such as age, specific objectives, proficiency levels, and learning environments is of great importance in designing a relevant matrix of content specifications for an intended teaching and learning context.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF CLT

So far this article has focused more on the theoretical discussion of CLT. It is important to see what challenges of CLT are in practical levels with respect to second/foreign language learning contexts. At least, two main issues of challenges can be identified: what really happens to CLT in actual contexts and what aspects should be taken into account in order to promote CLT classroom situations.

In terms of the first challenge, it is worth considering Savignon's (1991) note that the history of CLT tends to be more theoretical while little is known about CLT in practical levels. In other words, there has been such a gap between CLT as a conceptual framework and CLT as teaching and learning experiences. A study by Sato & Kleinsasser (1999) shows that although Australian teachers of Japanese admit that they practice CLT in their classroom activities, their practices are not based on CLT as widely discussed in the literature. Rather, they develop what they claim to be CLT based on their own beliefs and practical experiences. The similar situation is also true with respect to CLT in the Indonesian context. Sumardi (1989), for instance, claims that although communicative approach has been introduced to the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Indonesia since the implementation

of the 1984 Curriculum, language teachers, in practical terms, prefer to use grammar and translation method in their teaching practices. Similarly, Mantiri (2004) notes that for many English teachers in Indonesia CLT has mostly become a problem rather than a solution in such a way that they show a great degree of uncertainty as to how to implement it in classroom environments. This evidence provides an important insight for applied linguists in pursuing what Kaplan & Grabe (1991) call a mediation function of applied linguistics. Applied linguists, language practitioners, and language teachers are challenged to make use of theoretical accounts and insights regarding CLT to be applicable in classroom situations. Perhaps, such mediation can be in the forms of pre-service or in-service training for language teachers about what CLT really is and how it can work in classroom environments.

The second practical challenge refers to what factors are needed to be taken into account to promote CLT in teaching and learning situations. In this regard, there are at least two important issues, the issue of language curriculum design and language testing or assessment.

With regard to the issue of language curriculum design and development, it is worth noting what Lange (1990) claims, that is, language curriculum is now in a state of crisis. The crisis, to a great extent, comes from the paradigm on which the curriculum is based. According to Lange, language curriculum design and development so far has been mainly based on the *perennial analytic paradigm* in which everything about the curriculum is pre-designed by a top-down authority. There are no opportunities for teachers and learners to contribute to curriculum design and development. In contrast, as indicated above, the nature of CLT is learner-centred in both processes and goals. In this context, CLT assumes the necessity of adopting the *practical inquiry paradigm* which, according to Schubert (1986), is based on interaction between four commonplaces (teachers, learners, subject matter, and milieu) in developing and shaping the curriculum. Therefore, in order to promote CLT, designing and developing language curriculum should involve interaction between learners, teachers, subject matter, and milieu. This is also relevant to the notions of *collaborative*, *cooperative* and *interactive learning* as the fundamental strands of CLT as advocated by Oxford (1997).

The crisis of foreign/second language curriculum as indicated above, to a great extent, also persists in the Indonesian context. The notion of *curriculum development* seems to be commonly understood as a professional discourse in which a group of experts outside the school environment deter-

mines everything about the curriculum whole the role of teachers and students in engaging with the content and the processes of learning in the construction of curriculum is hardly (if not at all) acknowledged. This is strongly evidence by the historical accounts of the way English curriculum for secondary schools has been constructed (See, for example, Jazadi, 2004: 2-3). The nature of a top-down policy and mechanism underlies the processes of the curriculum development. On the other hand, common problems of teaching and learning outcomes such as the fact that students are unable to communicate despite their mastery of English grammatical properties still remain. In this regard, Priyono (2004:19) argues that the changes of English curriculum followed by the shift in orientation in methodology did not seem to resolve the real problems. CLT curriculum, thus, requires not only teaches' innovation and creativity in its implementation but also their active engagement in shaping, reviewing, and revising the curriculum through their actual teaching and learning practices.

In terms of language testing and assessment, it is well established that language assessment so far has been primarily based on quantitative approaches in the sense that it uses discrete points of grammatical rules (Shohamy, 2001; Alderson and Banerjee, 2001). This condition is particularly true with regard to the Indonesian context to the extent that although CLT has been incorporated in the 1984 and 1994 curriculum students are typically tested using form-based multiple choice questions (Jazadi, 2004). This kind of assessment is undoubtedly less relevant to comprehensively evaluate communicative competence for it only focuses on one of its components, linguistic competence. As pointed out by Savignon (2003), CLT requires that language assessment move from quantitative approaches to more qualitative ones. Similarly, Shohamy (2001) criticizes the traditional approach of testing since it is developed and designed by top-down authorities and thus not paying necessary attention to test takers' needs. Instead, she proposes the idea of *multiplism* in assessment that represents broader and more comprehensive considerations for assessing learning outcomes. More specifically, Alderson and Banerjee (2001) suggest that *alternative assessments* such as self-assessment, portfolio assessment, peer assessment, and performance assessment, et cetera have to be used in assessing learning processes and outcomes instead of traditional testing. It is obvious that CLT requires qualitative approaches to assessment and the incorporation of different types of assessments (alternative assessments) in order to measure learners' communicative competence in a comprehensive way.

CONCLUSION

Different ways of looking at language as a universal attribute of human being and languages as the manifestation of this attribute have resulted in different theories and approaches to the issues of what language is, how it works, and how it is learned and acquired. This fact influences the ways applied linguists define and develop their professional discourse in dealing with language-related problems. The emergence of different approaches to second language pedagogy is strong evidence of how applied linguists have differently incorporated theoretical insights from linguistics and other relevant disciplines in addressing empirical challenges in classroom situations.

CLT is one of the approaches that views language as a socially-embedded phenomenon. In the view of CLT, language is both linguistic and social behaviours in which interaction and meaning-makings constitute their fundamental elements. CLT, thus, suggests that second/foreign language teaching and learning should aim to promote communicative competence which consists of discourse, strategic, sociolinguistic/sociocultural, actional/functional, and grammatical competences.

The historical background of CLT suggests that CLT has come into existence as a result of a dialectical process between theories and practices and vice versa. This can be illustrated at least in the European and the American contexts. In both contexts, linguistic traditions such as functional linguistics and Hymes's notion of communicative competence have inspired language teachers, methodologists, and practitioners to continuously develop activities, practices, and models in order to promote CLT in classroom situations.

As an approach to second language pedagogy, CLT is characterized by learner-centeredness in the sense that learners are central in terms of teaching and learning processes and goals. Instructional techniques, therefore, should enable learners to get involved in the process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning through communicative tasks and activities. It should also be noted here that although CLT has gained wide acceptance in theoretical levels, real challenges at practical levels still remain. The issues of language curriculum design and language assessment are among the challenges of CLT in practical terms.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, J.C. & Banerjee, J. 2001. Language Testing and Assessment (Part 1). *Language Teaching*, 34: 213-236.

- Bachman, L.F. & Palmer, A.S. 1996. *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, H.D. 2001. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Longman.
- Canale, M. 1983. From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy. In J.C. Richards & R.W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and Communication* (pp. 2-27). New York: Longman.
- Celce-Murcia, M., Dornyei, Z. & Thurrell, S. 1995. Communicative Competence: A Pedagogically Motivated Model with Content Specifications. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6 (2): 5-35.
- Grabe, W. 2002. Applied Linguistics: An Emerging Discipline for the 21st Century. In R.B. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (pp. 3-12). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan, R.B. & Grabe, W. 1991. Introduction. In R.B. Kaplan & W. Grabe (Eds.), *Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (pp. 1-9). New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Kroehnert, G. 2000. *102 Extra Training Games*. Sydney: McGraw Company Australia Pty Limited.
- Lange, D.L. 1990. Sketching the Crisis and Exploring Different Perspectives in Foreign Language Curriculum. In D.W. Brickbichler (Ed.), *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education* (pp. 77-109). Lincolnwood, Ill: National Textbook Co.
- Lee, J.F. & VanPatten, B. 1995. *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. San Francisco: McGraw Hill.
- McCarthy, M. 2001. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R.L. 1997. Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, and Interaction: Three Communicative Strands in the Language Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81: 442-456.
- Sato, K. & Kleinsasser, R.C. 1999. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Practical Understandings. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83 (4): 494-517.
- Savignon, S.J. 1991. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): State of Art. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25 (2): 261-277.
- Savignon, S.J. 1997. *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Savignon, S.J. 2003. Teaching English as Communication: A Global Perspective. *World Englishes*, 22 (1): 55-73.
- Schubert, W.H. 1986. *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility*. New York: Macmillan.
- Shohamy, E. 2001. *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. New York: Longman Pearson Education.

- Stern, H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sumardi, M. 1989. Pendekatan Humanistik dalam Pengajaran Bahasa. In B.K. Purwo (Ed.), *PELLBA 2 Pertemuan Linguistik Lembaga Bahasa Atma Jaya: Kedua* (pp. 209-223). Yogyakarta: Kanisius.
- Taylor, D. 1988. The Meaning and Use of the Term 'Competence' in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 9: 148-168.